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TEMPLE OF NEPTUNE AT PÆSTUM
By G. B. Piranesi

PIRANESI, THE REMBRANDT OF ARCHITECTURE

Without wishing to voice pessimistic views as to future developments, and with full acknowledgment of the achievements of the few really great etchers of modern times, one may safely say that the golden age of etching is in an age long since past, and—the fact is sincerely to be deplored—too often forgotten. Else, perhaps, there would be little excuse at the present day for recounting the glories or dwelling upon the methods of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, one of the greatest of the Italian etchers and engravers.

Piranesi was born at Venice in the former half of the eighteenth century, and died in 1778. The story of his stupendous labors is thus, in a sense, a chapter of ancient history. But in view alike of the decline and possible revival of popular interest in etching, and of the marvelous effects which the masters of the art once succeeded in obtaining, it is a chapter well worth the perusal of art lover and of art student.

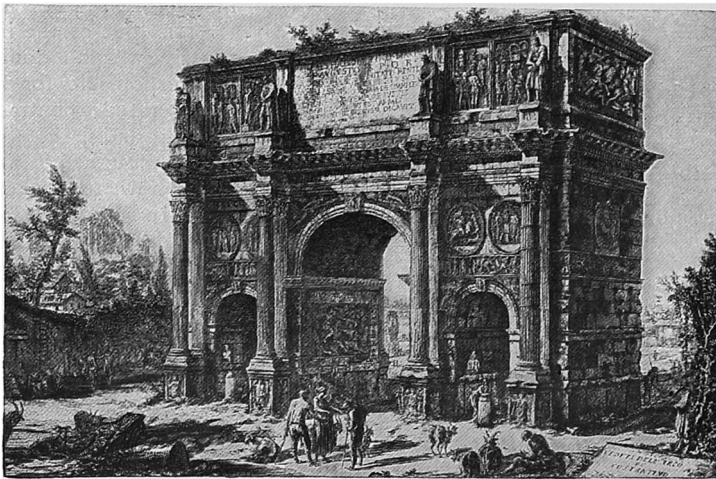
Certainly none of the old masters merits more careful consideration than Piranesi. "He was one of the last of the great painter-etchers and painter-engravers of old times," says Russell Sturgis, "and by no means the least of them. It may be extravagant to say, as some have said, that his work would be gathered as eagerly as Rembrandt's if it were not so bulky, but it is not extravagant to say

that no man has seen all that the engraver's art is capable of until he has seen and studied nearly everything that Piranesi has left."

These words of Sturgis are no small compliment to the master, and it should also be said that they impose no small task on the student who would be guided by the critic's advice and undertake a study of the Italian's works. For the etcher labored with indefatigable zeal from the day he became an art student in Rome, and was kindled to enthusiasm by the architectural remains of the Eternal City, till death stayed his hand, and his plates, to the number of about two thousand, were subsequently published in twenty-nine folio volumes.

These marvelous plates by Piranesi have small charm for the collector. They are too big and bold; they lack the daintiness and delicacy that the collector prizes; they are for the gallery, and not for the home; even in bound form they are for the art institute rather than for the private library. Hence the great master has been signally neglected, while scores of artists of inferior rank have been the idols of the collectors.

Indeed, as has frequently been pointed out, though Piranesi devoted his life to depicting the wonders of ancient architectural remains, his plates have not been prized by the student of architecture, to whom they have been picturesque scenes with wonderful effects of light and shade—mere pictures rather than faithful portrayals of ancient buildings, valuable for suggestions in present-day designing.



ARCH OF CONSTANTINE
By G. B. Piranesi

Great as is the work of Piranesi, his plates are not above criticism. Reference has just been made to their wonderful effects of light and shade, and these extreme contrasts are the etcher's peculiar fault. He was one of the gifted sons of Italy who gloried in the architectural remains of his country, and who saw in them an intense

poetic charm. In making the portrayal of these remains his life work, he sought to invest his plates with the same charm that the actual ruins had for him. In a sense his genius was scenic, and his invention was almost limitless. He could thus grasp the idea of the architect, and supply missing portions of the ruins for the sake of pictorial effect, and he could introduce altars, tombs, vases, and other accessories in the interest of his pictures.

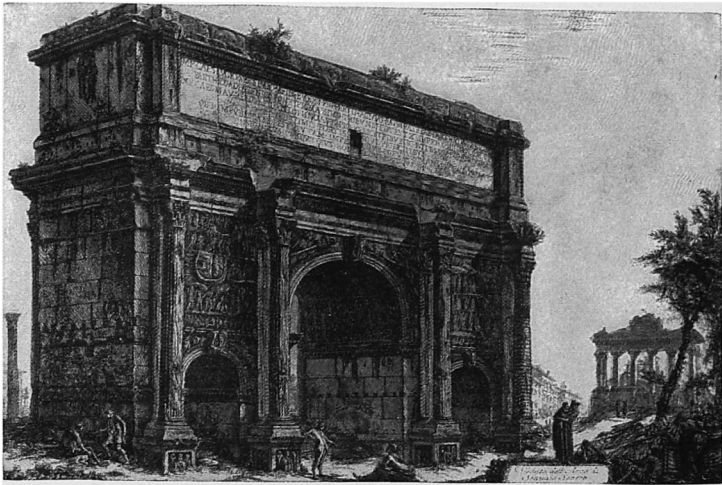
His love of the impressive was thus doubtless responsible for his exaggerated contrasts of light and dark. Indeed, though he well knew how to make a translucent shadow through which details could more or less

vaguely be seen, he deliberately renounced this form of architectural rendering, and undertook to get fairly correct outdoor effects by black and white, pure and simple. This involved him in no end of difficulties, with which he struggled, for the most part, with remarkable success.

In many of his plates we can see evidence of hesitation as to whether to express delicate architectural details or to yield to his love for strong contrasts. Usually his love of contrasts prevails, and the details which photography would have recorded are subordinated to strong lights and equally intense shadows. That this disposition of



TEMPLE OF THE SIBYL AT TIVOLI
By G. B. Piranesi



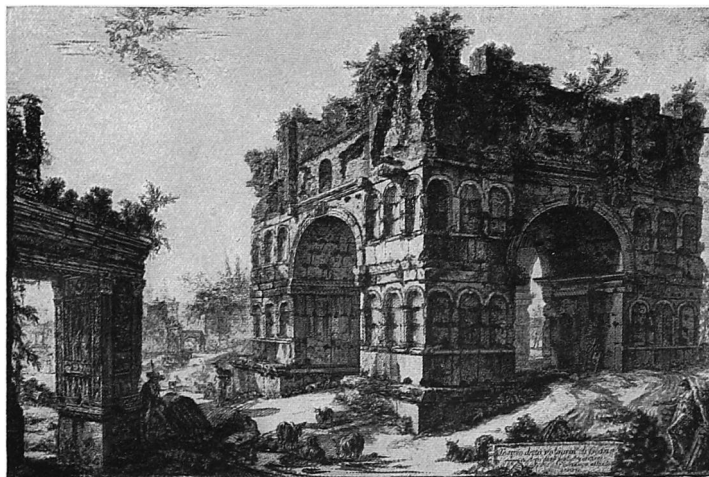
ARCH OF SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS
By G. B. Piranesi



VILLA OF MÆCENAS
By G. B. Piranesi



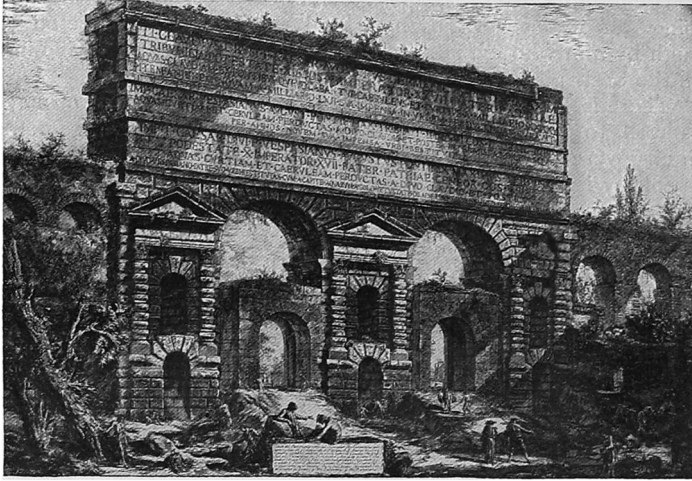
BATHS OF DIOCLETIAN
By G. B. Piranesi



TEMPLE OF JANUS
By G. B. Piranesi

sunlight and shade is contrary to fact no one knew, perhaps, better than Piranesi himself. But he had his own conviction of the impression he wished to convey, and he was strong enough to renounce the delicate gradations which another and weaker artist would probably have employed.

Thus, oddly enough, we find sunlit edges and intensely shaded sides of piers and columns; we find sunlight as intense as an electric flash, and the shadows of midday absolutely stygian; we find ornamen-



ARCH OF VESPASIAN
By G. B. Piranesi

tation that would naturally be vague and uncertain brought out in strong relief. These are defects which a man of less commanding genius would not be guilty of, but which Piranesi, doubtless with full knowledge of his error, committed without hesitation. The result is the peculiarly bold charm that makes the plates Piranesi's, and no one else's. The desired effects were further enhanced by a curious use of the burin line and the etched line, a peculiarity of method which Méryon also adopted, the severer work of the burin being supplemented by the freer lines of the etching needle.

That Piranesi purposely idealized his subjects or introduced accessories for pictorial effect is commonly admitted, and a question might be raised as to the value of these remarkable plates apart from their strictly pictorial value. In this regard one may safely accept the judgment of Mr. Sturgis. Says that eminent authority on architecture, in discussing the Piranesi plates:

"As regards the architecture itself, and the interest which the student may and ought to take in Piranesi's architectural studies, it must never be forgotten that he gave us the aspect of many a fine old building in its much more perfect condition, before the havoc wrought by one more century of popes and princes or of ignorant peasants, and also before the clearing out and cleaning up of the present archæological epoch. Now, the archæological work done during the last forty years has been, on the whole, advantageous from every point of view. No one can doubt that seriously; but there has also been—what was, perhaps, inevitable—a certain staying up and piecing out of old work by new; and this, although detected easily enough by him who examines the building itself, may deceive in any, even the best, pictorial representation.

"There is, of course, nothing of this in the Piranesi prints; and it is well to know in what condition these ruined monuments of antiquity were before the archæologists took hold of them. Modern archæology is, or should be, doubting and questioning, and likes not to accept things as true on the mere authority of long-continued assumption.

"It is good to learn, as one may learn from these prints, that the Arch of Titus was until lately built into a continuous wall, and on the Forum side at least, without its entablature, its free columns, and its architectural setting out. The print which shows this arch in connection with the Villa Farnese gives the other side—the side farther from the Forum—which had been left in somewhat better condition. But that view also shows the arch in a very different state from its present rearranged and more orderly aspect. This restored and rejuvenated appearance it was not to put on until seventy years after Piranesi's death.

"It is good to learn how the Temple of Cori looked in the year 1750 or thereabouts. The Castel Sant' Angelo, with its additions, its rooms built for popes escaping in terror from the Vatican and making a palace and fortress out of the old tomb of Hadrian, still keeps, indeed, some of its earlier aspects; but the print of it shown in this collection, covered all over with letters of reference, gives, in spite of these letters, in spite of the absurdly false perspective of the Round Tower, an image which one is glad to see preserved, of the old building of the popes.

"It is well to have the Piranesi view of the Pantheon, now that the belfries have been taken away, and the abortive secondary pediment has also disappeared, and the building is put, as nearly as modern archæologists can do it, back into its original form. Here, again, the drawing of the Round Tower is dreadfully 'out.' It seems odd that so accomplished a draftsman should never have learned the true secret of the 'perspective ellipse'; but indeed, that same 'ellipse' bothers modern draftsmen, too. The view of the Campo Vaccino may stir the memo-

ries of those who knew Rome forty years ago; and it is worth any one's while to muse over that for a moment, and reflect that under the peaceful grass and trees of this 'cow-field' lay the Roman Forum waiting to be exhumed.

"The two prints of the Antonine and the Trajan Columns are admirable renderings of richly adorned architecture, and these are artistic triumphs as well, models of what is fine in engraving. Finally,



INTERIOR OF SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE
By G. B. Piranesi

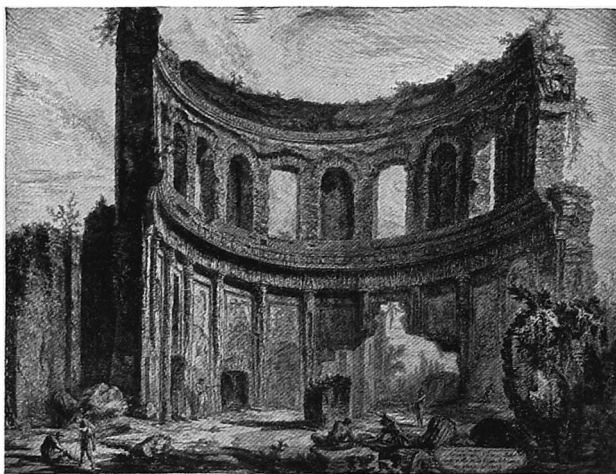
the Arch of Trajan at Benevento is really a magnificent piece of architectural drawing and engraving, and all our photographs should be compared with it for a right understanding of the sculpture. As a general thing, one hates to have a mind come between the original artist and himself. What the second-century sculptor meant to say the nineteenth-century student should be allowed to read without the interposition of Piranesi or any one else, and that is why photographs are good; but in this case Piranesi's drawing does serve as a valuable comment and illustrated lecture, which any one can afford to listen to, on the sculptures of the arch."

The accompanying illustrations, used here by courtesy of Albert Roullier, will give a good idea of the two thousand or more plates by the famous etcher. They show admirably his peculiar disposition of light and shade, his force and vigor, and his use of accessories for picturesque effect. The enthusiasm of the master for his art, his selection of subjects which developed into nothing less than a hobby,

and his lifelong industry are almost unparalleled in the history of Italian art. He was a law unto himself, and his prints, in manner and effect, are unlike anything the world has produced.

One would wish that the plates were of less generous proportions. They might perhaps lose in dignity and importance, but they would be more in keeping with present-day decorative requirements, and would doubtless thus become sharp rivals of prints that now find a more popular demand. Be that as it may, the plates are incomparable, despite the flaws that men of minor ability may point out in them, and they will be prized as masterpieces as long as etching shall hold its place among human interests. Italy has as much reason to glory in her Piranesi as Holland has in her Rembrandt and France in her Méryon.

W. J. WOODWORTH.



TEMPLE OF APOLLO
By G. B. Piranesi